DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 317 UD 028 135

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TITLE Development of Accurate Self-Concept in Black Children.
PUB DATE 19 Oct 90
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Council of Exceptional Children, Symposium on Culturally Diverse Exceptional Children (Albuquerque, NM, October 19, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; *Definitions; Elementary Secondary Education; *Identification (Psychology); *Personality Development; *Self Concept; Social Cognition; Student Behavior; Success

ABSTRACT

The success or failure of black children in school has been attributed to positive or negative self-concept, but the construct of self-concept has been misused and misrepresented by educators and researchers. The traditional definition of self-concept as a highly interrelated perception of the self has been defined in perceptual rather than operational terms. This perceptual definition fails to address the accuracy or inaccuracy of the self-concept; to acknowledge that self-concept is area-specific, multidimensional, observable, describable, and measurable; and to explain the operational utility of self-concept. The perceptual conceptualization of self-concept cannot be rigorously defined and is dangerously global, leading to a number of problems in assessing and interpreting the self-concept of black children. An operational definition of self-concept, based on an observable repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors, would allow teachers to focus on how the student functions in the classroom and help the student make self-directed changes. Studies indicate that educators need to focus on the accuracy of the self-concept, rather than on the global self-concept. A list of 43 references is appended. Recommendations for enhancing the self-concept of black students are made. (FMW)

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Paper presented at the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) National Symposia on Culturally Diverse Exceptional Children, Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 19, 1990.

UD028135

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Abstract

Recent reports have indicated tremendous shortcomings in the educational system of America. These shortcomings, to some educators, result from the inclusion of Black and other minority children in the educational mainstream. This presumption angers educators who believe that students (irrespective of race, color or national origin) can succeed when provided with appropriate learning tools. Another presumption that has permeated the literature is that Black children's "success" or "failure" is due to their "positive" or "negative" self-concept. This traditional view of self-concept is very popular. It regards self-concept as an interrelated perception of the self or how one perceives himself/herself. However, this view fails to recognize the self-descriptive nature of self-concept as an observable, describable, area-specific and measurable phenomenon. From the latter perspective, self-concept can be overt or covert, consistent or limited, accurate or inaccurate and can change as the context changes. In this paper, the authors discuss the development of accurate self-concept in Black children based on perceptional and operational conceptualizations. They provide some empirical support and discuss ways to enhance accurate self-concept of Black children.

Development of Accurate Self-Concept in Black Children

A plethora of reports and studies has challenged educators on quality and equity of Black children in the educational mainstream of American society. These reports have reflected social, economic and political trends, and very often, have blamed the educational sector for the society's ills and inefficiencies. Some educators have responded to these incessant criticisms with the negative presumption that the inclusion of Black and other minority children degenerates quality and excellence in education. This presumption angers many educators who believe that all students (irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, color and national origin) can excel when provided with appropriate learning tools and strategies. Presumptions of this magnitude only try to "scotch the snake but not kill it" because they are not altogether supported by research. In addition, they tend to lead to "quick-fixes" which have produced a proliferation of measurement tools, constructs, and interpretations. For example, some educators have attributed failures of some Black children to undergirding genetic deficits (Hernstein, 1971; Jensen, 1973, 1985; Shockley, 1972). Others have attributed success or failure of some Black children to "high" or "low" self-concept, self-perception and self-image (Aryal, 1987; Lawrence & Winchell, 1973; Lewin, 1948). Parillo (1980) reiterated that self-image or self-hatred manifests itself in many ways; however, he argued that "portraying negative self-image as a fairly general tendency among minority group members,

may be too broad a generalization" (p. 28).

Self-concept has continued to be an important educational phenomenon (Marsh and Holmes, 1990; McDavid and Garwood, 1978; Muller, 1978; Obiakor, 1990a; Obiakor and Alawiye, 1987; Obiakor and Stile, 1989, 1990; and Rogers, 1951), yet the construct has continued to be misused and misrepresented by educators and researchers. The traditional definition of self-concept has been based on perception and presumption, and to a large extent, on what the dominant society perceives to be in vogue. From this perspective, self-concept is defined as a highly interrelated perception of the self or how an individual views himself/herself (Rogers, 1951). To some traditionalists, self-concept is even formed before the student comes to school (Canfield & Wells, 1976). This perceptual definition has been very ineffective in addressing the specific needs of Black children because it fails to (a) look at the accuracy or inaccuracy of self-concept, and (b) recognize that self-concept is discreetly different, area-specific, multidimensional, observable, describable, and measurable, and (c) explain the operational utility of self-concept. In this paper, the authors discuss the development of accurate self-concept in Black children based on perceptual and operational conceptualizations. They provide empirical support, and discuss ways to enhance accurate self-concept of Black children.

Perceptual Conceptualization

The construct "perceptual" is derived from perception. In

its simplest form, perception refers to any insight, intuition, or knowledge achieved through any of the senses. Such an awareness is frequently not supported by any scientific, empirical or research evidence. It is based on what people want to hear or what is in vogue in a particular society. Dember (1961) explained perception as an unprecise scientific concept which cannot be rigorously and thoroughly defined. For instance, the assumption that Black children have "low" self-concept is based on perception. In special education today, perceptions have led to unwarranted generalizations, labels, categorizations, placements, expectations and conflicts.

The above explanation of the construct, "perceptual" demonstrates that it cannot be rigorously and thoroughly defined. Since the construct cannot be rigorously defined, there is difficulty in observing, describing, measuring, and quantifying it. Very often, perceptions depend on personal idiosyncracies. The problem, it seems, is that many educators and practitioners regard perceptions as solutions rather than as ingredients. Such educators show the unwillingness to spend the time needed in diagnostic interpretation of <u>specific</u> strengths and weaknesses of individual students.

The perceptual conceptualization of self-concept is dangerously global. From this theoretical orientation, self-concept is seen as a highly interrelated set of perceptions of the self (Canfield & Wells, 1976; Kinch, 1963, Labenne & Greene, 1969; McDavid & Garwood, 1978). For instance, McDavid

and Garwood (1978) affirmed that "self-concept is a particular set of attributes and beliefs, values, and actions, all integrated into organized and consistent behavior with the person" (p. 453). They also argued that self-concept cuts across all facets of experience and action. Put another way, self-concept ties together the variety of specific habits, abilities, outlooks, beliefs and values that a person displays.

The perceptual model of self-concept supposedly combines the intricate variables that make up a human phenomenon. Rogers and Diamond (1954) asserted that a positive self-concept is a prerequisite to an individual's personal happiness and effective daily functioning. Wright (1960) stressed that self-concept and behavior are interdependent. About a decade later, Purkey (1970) indicated that cognitive learning increases when self-concept increases. In the same dimension, McDavid and Garwood (1978) related measures of self-concept to:

1. Reading ability.
2. Mathematical ability.
3. Scores on standardized tests.
4. Grades in schools.
5. Teacher's ratings.
6. Children's feelings of personal adequacy.
7. Children's classroom behavior.

The above theses sound good, and appear to be ideas that people would like to hear. However, there is virtually little or no research evidence to support the validity of these statements.

Following are problems associated with the perceptual definition, assessment and interpretation of self-concept of Black children:

1. The instruments that are traditionally used to measure self-concept of Black children (e.g. Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale) did not define self-concept. How can an instrument measure the construct that it has failed to define?
2. Self-perceptions render the measurement of self-concept difficult.
3. Interpretations based on the traditional perceptual model is too global. They fail to identify specific areas of strengths and weaknesses of Black Students' self-concepts.
4. Self-concept instruments have standardized norms. It is educationally unproductive to compare Black students' specific self-descriptive behaviors to other children of different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. Like other students, Black students are different intra- and inter-individually.
5. Educational instructions are useful when they are specifically tailored to address unique needs of individual Black children. The traditional "high" and "low" or "positive" and "negative" explanations of self-concept create problems in designing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs for Black children.
6. Errors in interpretations of instruments lead to errors

in placements. When a Black student is misperceived or misjudged as having a "low" or "negative" self-concept, he/she might unconsciously develop a similar predictive behavior (usually regarded as a self-fulfilling prophecy). There is a stigma that goes along with a wrong label or categorization.

Operational Conceptualization

The construct "operational" pertains to an operation or a series of operations. Royce (1973) noted that operationally defined concepts are limited to observables. Such concepts have a demonstrable or functional relationship with science. In dealing with Black and other "special" children, functional terms, definitions and instruments have shown more clarity. For instance, the definition of self-concept as an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors and the related use of area-specific instruments facilitate productive interpretations. As a consequence, the teacher focuses more attention on helping the Black child to learn, and less attention on the general life of the child. The way the Black child functions in the classroom becomes a primary concern of the teacher, and not how he or she is perceived by that teacher.

Most contemporary educators reckon that behavior changes are observable, describable, quantifiable and measurable. The definition of the construct, "operational," is limited to observables which show demonstrable relationship with science. This is where operational "accuracy" or "inaccuracy" of self-

concept merges with the contemporary phenomenon. The idea that "self-concept means different things to different people" has failed. As a self-descriptive behavior, self-concept is measurable in terms of its changing context. Muller (1978) defined self-concept as an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors which include self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-ideal. From this theoritical framework, self-concept is a set of discreetly different, independent, multidimensional, possibly hierarchical factors or areas (Byrne, 1984; Hoelter, 1985; Marsh, Barnes & Hocever, 1985; Marsh & Smith, 1986; Marsh & Holmes, 1990, Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1983; Obiakor, 1990b; Obiakor & Stile, 1989, 1990; Obiakor, Stile & Muller, 1988; Pottebaum, Keith & Elly, 1986; Princes & Obiakor, 1990; Shavelson, Bolus & Keasling, 1980). In projecting the self-descriptive nature of self-concept, Muller (1978), and Muller, Chambliss and Muller (1983) described self-concept as a covert or overt, accurate or inaccurate, consistent or contradictory, extensive or limited, area-specific, functional phenomenon which can change as the context changes. According to Muller and his associates, self-concept has three components (self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-ideal) from different school related and non-school related behaviors such as physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness. Following are definitions of self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-ideal:

1. Self-knowledge: Self-knowledge is a subset of self-descriptive behaviors which describe the

individuals' characteristics or qualities. This includes descriptions of physical appearance, behavior, abilities, and cognitive patterns. Self-knowledge includes self-descriptions which indicate an evaluation of characteristics but does not include statements which indicate self-valuations. A sample statement is, " I am an intelligent Black student."

2. Self-esteem: Self-esteem is the subset of self-descriptive behaviors which indicate self-valuations. In this instance, the individual evaluates certain self-characteristics relative to how he/she values those characteristics. A sample statement is, "I like my myself for being an intelligent Black student."
3. Self-ideal: Self-ideal is the subset of self-descriptive behaviors that indicate self-qualities which the student desires to achieve or maintain through the expenditure of personal efforts. A sample statement is "I will endeavor to work hard as an intelligent Black student."

It appears that currently utilized methodologies, curricular and instructional materials do not provide teachers with the tools for effectively meeting the needs of Black children. Muller and his associates prescribed a functional or an accurate self-concept as a principal goal of self-concept instruction. This prescription will allow the Black child to more effectively deal with his/her chosen environment and facilitate decision making for self-directed change. Changes that are self-directed

are more effective in classroom management--they increase intrinsic motivation, internal locus of control and attribution of success or failure to oneself. Black children are very capable of challenging themselves with novel situations. The line should be drawn between sensitivity to Black children's needs and unnecessary feeling of empathy when Black children should be challenged. The repeated notion that Black children are helpless poor individuals solidify existing negative labels which are counter-productive to good pedagogy.

An accurate conceptualization of the self is apparently beneficial to Black children. Educators need to focus on the accuracy of the self rather than on the global self. Following are three notable caveats:

1. General self-concept cannot be confused for an area and/or a component of self-concept. Even though self-knowledge, is a self-descriptive behavior, it is different from either self-esteem or self-ideal.
2. Instruments that fail to define the construct that they purport to measure should be carefully reviewed when used with Black children. The problem, basically, is not the instrument. The problem is the misdiagnosis, misinterpretation or misplacement that results from the misuse of the instrument. It is important that educators discover the areas of strengths and weaknesses of Black children.
3. Judgements based on the perception of Black children are

dangerous and self-defeating. Educators should be sensitive and not sorry for Black children.

Research Support and Implications

The accurate self-concept phenomenon emphasizes the multidimensional, area-specific, and situation-specific nature of self-concept. Muller and his associates have done extensive research in this area. They designed the Student's Self-Assessment Inventory which measures self-concept with particular focus on academic success, peer relations, school adaptiveness and physical maturity. Marsh and his associates have also done extensive research which address the multidimentionality of self-concept. They designed the Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ, SDQ2 and SDQ3) which looks at the general self-concept, and school related and non-school related aspects of self-concept.

It is apparent that previous self-concept studies have used instruments (e.g., Tennessee Self-Concept Scale or Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale) which have failed to define self-concept, the construct that they are supposed to measure. Normative samples of these instruments have been used for scoring and interpretation. The global interpretation of either "high" or "low" self-concept makes it difficult to design Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), especially for Black students. It is difficult to use area-specific instruments with global interpretations--this indicates that these instruments lack operational clarity.

Sharp and Muller (1978) used the Self-Descriptive Inventory

(now the Student's Self-Assessment Inventory) to measure self-concepts of college students. They gave false aptitude test results to college students which led them to believe they were either extremely capable or incapable of learning a foreign language. A group received no information relative to ability. Sharp and Muller found that simply raising the positiveness of self-concept may not result in enhanced school learnings. In addition, they discovered that students who had their self-concept lowered through supportive feedback learned faster than those who had their self-concept lowered through judgmental presentation of negative information.

Velasco-Barraza and Muller (1982) confirmed previous findings in their investigation of self-concepts of students from Chile, Mexico and the United States of America. They found that school experiences had similar effects on self-concepts of children, irrespective of the children's culture or nationality. Alawiye (1986) reaffirmed Velasco-Barraza and Muller's finding using the Student's Self-Assessment Inventory to study the self-concept of Ghanaian and Gambian School children. Obiakor and Stile (1990) used the Student's Self-Assessment Inventory to compare the development of self-concept in normally sighted and visually impaired school children. The results supported the area-specificity of self-concept, and disproved the assertion that the visually impaired have "low" self-concept because of their inability to see and form concepts.

Marsh and Holmes (1990) reiterated the problem of poor

quality measurement instruments in relation to theory, empirical research, and practice on self-concept. This problem has been addressed by other studies (Burns, 1979; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976; Wylie, 1979). Previous works by Marsh, et al. (Marsh, 1986, 1987, 1988; Marsh and Gouvernet, 1989; Marsh and Shavelson, 1985; and Marsh and Smith, 1985) have supported the multidimensional, area-specific, and situation-specific conceptualization of the self.

Even though, the aforementioned studies did not primarily focus on Black children, they have some implications for practitioners involved in the education of Black children, namely:

1. There is a dearth of quality research measuring self-concepts of Black students.
2. Self-concepts of Black children can be measured and quantified operationally.
3. Self-concepts of Black students are self-descriptive behaviors which can be overt or covert, extensive or limited, accurate or inaccurate and change as contexts change.
4. There are area-specific measurement tools which can lead to useful interpretations, placements, and education of Black children.
5. The evaluation of Black children's performance should be functionally based. Put another way, it should help them to make goal-directed decisions.

Enhancing Black Children's Self-Concepts

It appears that dividing the self-concept of Black Children into discreet construct areas would provide avenues for understanding the specific areas of self-concept that need enhancement. As Muller, Chambliss and Muller (1982) pointed out, "instructional strategies designed to alter self-concept can be focused on those aspects directly relevant to the school" (p. 9).

Self-concept, as a construct, can neither be ignored nor avoided in working with Black children. It is important that educators properly understand the operational perspective of the construct if they are to reduce the endemic problems confronting Black children in education today. Also important is the understanding that self-concept is not a predetermined phenomenon that remains static in spite of the situation and time. Apparently, self-concept can be enhanced. It is imperative that educators involved with the enhancement of Black children's self-concept endeavor to:

1. Emphasize accuracy of self-concept in the identification of specific strengths and weaknesses of Black children's self-concepts.
2. Avoid labels and categorizations which force Black children to internalize negative options.
3. Modify the external contingencies that impinge upon Black children's self-concepts (e.g. environments, teachers, teaching strategies, assessment tools and interpretations, etc.).

4. Provide novel situations which can challenge Black children. The sensitivity to needs should be emphasized, and being unnecessarily sorry should be deemphasized.
5. Inspire Black children to control their lives by allowing them to make goal-directed decisions. Failure should not be regarded as a deterrent--it should be an inspiration for Black students to work harder.
6. Design programs which will help Black children to (a) understand who they are, (b) love themselves for who they are, and (c) be willing to expend efforts to achieve their goals and objectives in life.
7. Understand and appreciate different cultures, and relate their ideas of self-concept to cultural values, beliefs and history. Such an understanding and appreciation will reduce undergirding perceptual assumptions of Black children's self-concept.
8. Deemphasize deficit assumptions which hamper the education of Black children, and emphasize developmental aspects of education--This emphasis coincidentally synchronizes with the situation-specific nature of self-concept.
9. Design programs that facilitate cooperative community involvement. Black parents cannot (and should not) be divorced from self-concept programs of their children. Some program planners have been less sensitive to the role of the Black community.

10. Deemphasize the idea that a positive correlation exists between Black children's self-concept and intelligence, and other academic related areas. Statements that are not altogether supported by research are as dangerous as statements that result from biased unidimensional research. As a consequence, particular attention should be focused on (a) the validity and reliability of traditional self-concept tools, (b) assumptions that result from the utility of these tools, and (c) clear delineation of educational implications.

Conclusion

There is enough data to support the long history of discrimination that Blacks have endured. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Head Start Legislation of 1964, Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act of 1965, Education of All Handicapped Children's Act of 1975 (PL 94-142), and its pre-school extension (PL 99-457) are some legislative efforts to ameliorate the problems of disadvantaged and handicapped children, irrespective of race, color or national origin. Unfortunately, these efforts have not fully deterred discriminatory assessment, placement, labels and categorizations of Black children in school programs. Some educators have continued to make unwarranted assumptions about Black children based on perceptions and instruments that lack validity and/or reliability. For example, the "success" or "failure" of some Black children in school programs have been attributed to "positive" on "negative" self-concept. This

assumption positively correlates with the traditional definition of self-concept which regards self-concept as a highly interrelated perception of the self. This view is counter-productive, and fails to recognize the area-specific and situation-specific nature of self-concept.

From a much more operational perspective, self-concept is observable, describable, measurable and quantifiable. Put another way, self-concept is an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors. To meet the desired needs of Black children in school programs, it is important to observe, describe, measure, and interpret their self-concepts in such ways that they do not feel labeled or categorized in their efforts to make functional goal-directed decisions. As a consequence, it behooves educators and practitioners to emphasize the accuracy of self-concept which will facilitate the identification of specific areas of strengths and weaknesses of Black children.

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